# ASPECTS OF STANDARDIZATION IN WEST AFRICAN CREOLE ENGLISH

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In the 2,500 mile stretch of West Africa between the Gambia and the Campoon rivers, nearly one thousand indigenous languages and dialects are spoken. The languages of colonization throughout the same area are English, French and Portuguese, but native speakers of these, other than expatriates, are few, and those speaking any of them proficiently form only a small minority of the overall population, which today approaches nearly one hundred million.

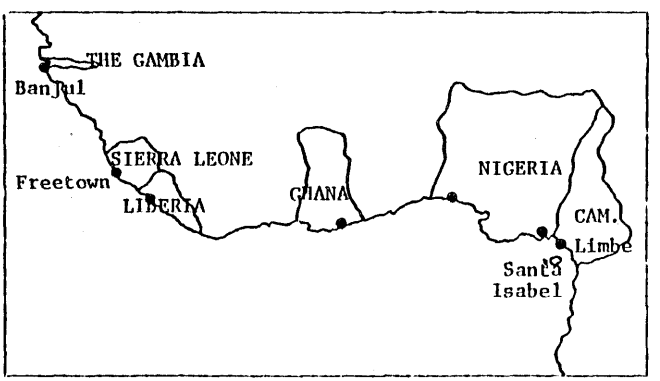
Throughout the same area, there are also spoken dialects of a language which for the purposes of this paper I am calling *West African Creole English* (WACE). This has more speakers, and a wider geographical spread, than any other coastal language spoken in West Africa, and yet it has in the past been consistently subjected to efforts to eradicate it. The 25 years since independence, however, have seen some softening of attitudes towards it in many places, especially at the academic level. At the popular level, this is much less apparent. It is paradoxical that so useful and widespread a language should not have attained some measure of official sanction and standardization long ago.

West African Creole English is a chain of dialects sharing common historical origins, probably developing along similar but distinct lines in both Upper and Lower Guinea, and differing less in its extremes than, say, Scottish and Appalachian English. It is a native language for the Creole (Krio) population in Sierra Leone, which inhabits the Sierra Leone Peninsula villages and the capital city of Freetown, and for the Creoles from the same country who have settled in Banjul (formerly Bathurst), where they are known as *Akus*, in Limbe (formerly Victoria) and in Santa Isabel, these last two towns being located in Cameroon and Fernando Poo respectively. Immigrant WACE-speaking populations are also found in the larger non-anglophone cities along the coast, such as Conakry and Abidjan, as well as on the island of São Tomé.

In Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria and Cameroon WACE is known as *Pidgin*, or sometimes *Brokes*, *Broken* or *Broken English*. In the Gambia and in Sierra Leone, the names *Krio* or sometimes *Patois* are used, and never "*Pidgin*", since the concentrations of native speakers in those countries are aware that their use of WACE differs in many respects from the non-native varieties elsewhere along the Coast. In Cameroon, the situation is somewhat different, since the Creole population is very small in comparison with the huge L2-speaking population, and awareness of these differences is less clearcut.

As its name makes clear, WACE is a creole, although by far the greatest number of its speakers know it only as a second language. Many of these nevertheless speak it fluently, as in Sierra Leone or Cameroon, and use their mother tongue far less frequently or with as much fluency. Others have a more restricted command of WACE, although determining the differences between pidginized WACE and foreigner WACE is difficult, since first language WACE already exhibits the same universal features one associates with the process of pidginization. To generalize, second language WACE may be characterized by phonological interference from the native language of its speaker, and by his restricted familiarity with its idiomatic and non-core vocabulary. Culturally, speakers of these varieties are not usually so familiar with the folklore, proverbs and other oral traditions that first language WACE speakers have as part of their ethnic repertory, since native speaking communities are not associated with any single indigenous tribe, and constitute discrete ethnic communities in themselves. Second language speakers are similarly unlikely to to be familiar with such L1 registers as lovers' talk or baby talk, or with the various kinds of secret or play languages which seem to be common in Creole societies.

In Cameroon especially, second language WACE is becoming nativized in an increasing number of households, especially in urban areas. Such cases, which typically come about as a result of intermarriage between speakers of different mother tongues, and which seems to be an urban, middle class phenomenon, do not result in the family's adopting much of the traditional Creole culture along with the language -- another reason for not treating nativization and creolization as quite the same thing.




*Countries in which dialects of WACE are spoken*

Liberia is a special case, in that the earlier varieties of WACE have been influenced by the arrival during the first part of the nineteenth century of the Settlers, freed slaves from North America whose dialect differed considerably from WACE, but which has since come typically to be associated with Liberia.

Before dealing with matters of orthography, the problems associated with selecting a standard dialect, or dialects, should perhaps be addressed. For purposes of illustrating the extent of the diversity between different dialects of WACE, some sample sentences are provided in both Gambian Krio and in Cameroonian, and while they cannot be representative of all the varieties of each possible, they do represent both extremes of the area throughout which WACE is spoken, along the West African littoral. The Krio sentences were provided by Ms. Hymnal Williams, a native speaker born in Banjul; the Cameroonian equivalents were kindly provided by Mr. Samuel J.R. Sadembwo, a native speaker of Bafang but whose primary language is Cameroonian WACE and in which he is far more fluent than he is in his ancestral tongue. Both speakers were in their late twenties when these sentences were recorded.

| *Krio* | *Cameroonian* | *English* |
|---|---|---|
| na yu gɛ dis os?<br>na yu os dis? | na yɔ has bi dis? | is this your house? |
| a nɔ ebul waka<br>biyɛn yu<br>a kyã waka biyɛn yu | mi a no fit wɔka<br>mi, fɔ yɔ baksat | I can't walk<br>behind you |
| una bin go sidɔm<br>klos mi<br>una bin fɔ sidɔm<br>klos mi | wuna bi fɔ shidɔŋ<br>fɔ ma kɔna | you (pl.) should<br>have sat near me |
| a de gɛda mi<br>kpanjuku | mi a di pak ma kako | I'm getting my<br>things together |
| dɛm bin kam gi am<br>wan tori bɔt in<br>fambul we de na<br>Yawnde | dɛm bi kɔm gif hi<br>wan tɔli we i bi<br>bɔt yi fambru we<br>dɛn de fɔ Yawnde | they came and told<br>him a story about<br>his family who<br>are in Yaounde |
| na wetin du yu nɔto<br>wi edman igen? | fɔseka wɔti yu no<br>bi wi hɛtman agɛn? | why aren't you<br>still our boss? |
| di uman bin yɛri am<br>wit ɔl tu in yes | di wuman bi hia hi<br>witi ɔl tu yi ɔa | the woman heard him<br>with both ears |
| ɛf a tek dis nɛf<br>chuk am, i go<br>pul blɔd | ifi mi a tek dis naf<br>chuk am, blɔt go<br>kɔmɔt fɔ yi insat | if I stab it with<br>this knife, it<br>will bleed |

From Liberia eastwards along the coast, dialects of WACE approach the Nigerian/Cameroonian varieties in their structure and English-derived content; the Gambian, Sierra Leone, Limbe and Santa Isabel dialects form another group, whose common features reflect their more recent shared origin. The Cameroonian and Fernando Poo Creole communities descend from the settlers who went to live in those places as refugees, merchants and administrators towards the end of the last century; there is still some possibility, on the other hand, that Gambian WACE (Aku) has been spoken in that country since the initial period of creole formation in West Africa, and indeed that the River Gambia was a point of origin for varieties now spoken everywhere on the coast.

THE GAMBIA: Banjul; L1; L2; Christian; Muslim

SIERRA LEONE: Freetown and Peninsula; Upline; Christian; Muslim; Oku (Creoles of Yoruba descent)

LIBERIA: Interior pidgin; barracks pidgin

GHANA: Interior pidgin; urban pidgin; barracks pidgin

NIGERIA: Western; Midwestern; Eastern; Northern

CAMEROON: Eastern; Western; Coastal; Ecclesiastical; Limbe Creole

FERNANDO POO (= MACIAS NGUEMA): Varieties of Gulf area Pidgin; Santa Isabel Creole

SÃO TOMÉ: No data available, but probably an offshoot from the Fernandino community (Sundiata, 1976)

*Classification of WACE dialects*

The traditional distinction drawn between a pidgin and a creole, *viz.* that the latter is a nativized, expanded development of the former, does not easily hold for the West African situation. It would seem that it has almost always been WACE which has provided the target rather than metropolitan English (*i.e.* any kind of European English); except in areas where WACE is not spoken and English is taught in the schools as a foreign language, there is nowhere in West Africa where WACE is not in far more widespread daily use than is English, and it is therefore not easy to say that such-and-such a community's dialect is foreigner *English*; it is rather the case that the Pidgin-speaking population will exhibit learners' errors where general *WACE*, rather than English, is the target. For some individuals there will naturally be pressure to reach English, and the performance of such people will reflect more or less interfer-

ence from WACE. The social attitudes towards English and WACE are also such that many speakers will anglicize their WACE, and continue to speak it that way, even when they are quite competent in metro English.

The concept of a "general WACE" should perhaps be explained: as used here, it means simply the most conventionalized, established speech found in a community as spoken by those individuals who are admired for their competence in it. Although acknowledgement of such a norm does not seem to be a conscious one, all of the L2-WACE speakers consulted on this point during the preparation of this paper indicated this one way or another.

Differences among the various dialects are the result of their individual development since the formative period, although some of these, such as the distribution of prepositional *na* vs. *fɔ* may in fact date from the very beginning. Because of an assumed common substratum, and because of shared features of creolization and their contiguous geographical location, the basic structure for all of the WACE dialects is the same; differences could be incorporated within a single grammatical description, if such were made available in textbook form for schools, for instance.

Without dealing with the mechanics of the genesis of creole languages, for which a number of hypotheses exist, it may be briefly stated that the crucial period for WACE formation seems to have been the years between *ca.* 1580 and 1630, although they have of course been developing constantly since that time. Evidence suggests that this took place in the Eurafrican communities which were becoming established along the Coast, where European *lançados* and local Africans were establishing households and raising families. The circumstances of these unions have been dealt with elsewhere (in *e.g.* Hancock, 1972, 1983 and Mathurin-Mair, 1978), and are the subject of a book currently in progress (Hancock, forthcoming). The mouth of the River Gambia was settled very early on, but similar settlements were also being established in Lower Guinea. The earliest English community, in fact, for which we have a date at all was at Benin where John Whyndam, the son of the then mayor of London and thirty of his men were permanently abandoned in 1553 as political exiles. The sporadic communication by ship between Upper and Lower Guinea, and the gradual focussing of both areas of trade and WACE growth on the Gold Coast, situated midway between them, saw the latter eventually becoming the principal dispersal point for the carriage of WACE overseas and its subsequent development into the American creoles. It seems, therefore, that from the earliest period of contact there have been two main areas of WACE formation and spread, each influencing the other as a result of trade, population mobility, and (more recently) through the record industry, which has resulted in turn in the introduction of a number of Caribbeanisms and West Indian musical styles into West Africa.

Differences are primarily lexical and phonological. Core vocabulary items share a very high rate of cognate forms in all of the dialects, but the Krio-related group differs markedly in its deviance from the sourceform (*i.e.* English) phonology:

| *English* | *Krio* | *Cameroonian* |
|---|---|---|
| glad | gladi | glat |
| fellow | fɛlɛ | fɛlo |
| find | fɛn | fan, fayn |
| potato | pɛtɛtɛ | poteto |
| thunder | tɛnda | tɔnda |
| tobacco | tabaka | tobako |
| today | tide | tude |
| tomato | tamatis | tumato, tumeto |
| tomorrow | tamara | tumɔro |
| tornado | tinada | tɔnedo |

Krio forms reflect a much higher incidence of retained archaic and provincial British phonology than do Cameroonian forms. In normal discourse this, together with a somewhat different distribution of stress and tone (*e.g.* Krio ɔŋkúl, antí, kɛrékɛta, prɔpɔtí, *&c.*, Cameroonian ɔ́ŋku, ánti, kárakta, prɔ́pati, *&c.*) makes the Krio group difficult to understand for speakers of the other dialects, though Krio speakers, many of whom also know English and recognize English stress, have little difficulty with Lower Guinea WACE dialects.

Another factor distinguishing the Krio-related group from all other WACE dialects is its much more extensive lexicon. Krio often has a number of terms for synonymous or near-synonymous concepts where other dialects will have just one or two, or else express the concept with a phrase:

| *English* | *Krio* | *Cameroonian* |
|---|---|---|
| carry a load on the head | pantete | tut am fɔ hɛt |
| cut | kɔt, chɛchɛ, chap, slayz | kɔt |
| fasten | fashin, fiks, tɛch | put am fɔ |
| wash genitals | tamba | wɔsh bɔtɔm bɛli |

One solution might be to establish two standard regional dialects, each based on the two being discussed here. It would be necessary to avoid terms which are current only in their area of origin (for example words like *skwɛks* "sweetheart" in the Gambia, *abi* "nevertheless" in Nigeria, or *kwa* "bag" in Cameroon), and to keep the written standards as conservative, *i.e.* as free from anglicizing influence, as possible. English intrusions into WACE are common, and unless they occur unnaturally usually pass unnoticed, and certainly uncorrected. WACE intrusions into West African English are, on the other hand, reason for some quite imaginative punishments in the classroom. West African Creole English grammar should be taught as rigorously as English grammar, the differences as well as the similarities being stressed. Problems arising from the lexical similarities between the two have been the subject of a number of studies, and arise from the assumption that if a word sounds the same in both languages it must mean the same. It is doubtful, however, whether any two cognates share one hundred percent correlation. Thus *bif* means "animal" and not "beef", which is expressed otherwise; *bɛlɛ/bɛli* can mean "womb", "abdomen", "seat of the emotions" or "middle portion" as well as "belly"; as simple a word as *igen/agɛn* means not "again" but "any more" in WACE: *a no layk yu agɛn* "I don't like you any more". *Again* is expressed by "back": *ple am bak* "play it again". *Enough* doesn't mean "enough", but "a lot of"; *find* means "look for", and so on. The reverse, assuming creolisms to be potential anglicisms, can produce such forms as *next tomorrow* for "the day after tomorrow" (Krio *nɛks tumara*), or *your shoes are supposed to live in that corner* (in Krio, *yu sus dɛn sɔpos fɔ lib na da kɔna*).

English interference is usually phonological, which may result in hypercorrections such as *wisko* and *skɔla* (in Krio) for "whiskers" and "to collar (someone)". Whole sentences from English may be inserted into a WACE sequence, and occasional non-Creole free morphemes such as "of": *wan ɔv mi padi*, "one of my friends" in Krio, rather than *wan mi padi* or *wan pan mi padi*. Some nouns may also occur with the English plural {-s}: *dɛn dɛz ya*, "these days", *sɔn nyu tinz*, "some new things", but this appears to be restricted to a small number of items, all of them English-derived. At present, the occurrence of English inflectional morphology is rare at any level, and there are no clear mesolectal forms between *e.g.* Krio *dɛn pikin dɛn de ple na dɛn neba yad* and "those children are playing in their neighbour's yard", and for monolingual speakers only the morphemes {*play-*}, {*neighbour*} and {*yard*} would be recognizable in the English sentence.

*Orthography*

Two factors should be considered in choosing a suitable spelling system for WACE: familiarity and availability. Traditionally, any WACE speaker who was literate, was literate in English, and if he had any reason to write WACE, did so in an English-based orthography. Most of the WACE texts available are written in this way,

and nearly all of them are aimed at the popular audience. Attempts to represent the dialects phonemically are usually the work of scholars, whose writings seldom circulate in the public domain.

Less commonly, English spelling conventions are applied in a generalized way, without regard for the spelling of the English cognate, in an attempt to stress the *un*-Englishness of WACE. Thus in the sample from *Unity*, below, the pronoun "we" is written with an unnecessary double ‹ee›, "water" has a double ‹tt› not extant in the sourceform, and so on. There are two reasons for not employing this kind of spelling: firstly because it does not accurately represent the pronunciations intended, even for people familiar with the language, and secondly, it is likely to interfere with the same user's command of English orthography. It might be added that an emotional resistance might also be expected from those who believe that such spellings serve only to reinforce the notion that WACE is "Broken English".

In the same way that the standard dialects should be as unlike English as possible, without sounding contrived, so the orthography should be quite distinct from English orthography. It is especially important to maintain these distinctions when the metropolitan and the creolized varieties of the same language are in use in the same environment.

*Phonemes of Freetown Krio*

p b t d k g kp gb f v s z ʃ ʒ tʃ dʒ l r m n ŋ ɲ y w i

e ɛ a ɔ o u ĩ ɛ̃ ẽ ã ɔ̃ õ ũ (diphthongs: aw ay ɔy ãw ãy ɔ̃y)

*Original English-based orthography (excerpt from a column in the weekly newspaper Unity), in Freetown Krio:*

"Samba-Letta hace im keyap up for wee special Consibul dem. Ef fis yeet fis, ooswan nar sol watta yone? Tu bigue ress loss, yu halla lek oo den kwiss" (= *"Samba Letter tips its hat to our special police. If fish eat fish, which belongs to the sea? Two bags of rice get lost, and you cry out like someone being mauled"*).

*The same, in sourceform spelling:*

"Samba Letter hoist him cap up for we special constable them. If fish eat fish, which one *na* salt water own? Two bag rice lost, you holler like who them squeeze" (sa 'mba 'lɛta 'es ĩ 'kyap↓'ɔp fɔ wi 'spɛʃal 'kɔnsibul dɛ̃ # ɛf 'fis↓'yit↓'fis # 'us ↓'wã na 'sɔl wa'ta↓'yon # 'tu ↓ 'bayg↓'ɣɛs↓'lɔs # yu 'a'la↓'lɛk↓'u↓'dɛn↓'kwis ##).

*The same, in the Decker orthography (Decker, 1965):*

"Samba Leta eys im kiap ohp foh wi speshal kohnsibul dem. Ef fis yit fis, us wan na sohl wata yon? Tu baig res lohs, yu ala lek u dem kwis".

*The same, in KLS orthography (Hancock, 1972ff):*

"Samba Leta eys inh kyap op foh wi speshal konsibul denh. Ef fis yit fis, us wan na sol wata yown? Tu baig res los, yu ala lek' u denh kwis".

*The same, in the Fyle & Jones orthography (Fyle & Jones, 1980):*

"Samba Lɛta es in kyap ɔp fɔ wi spɛshal kɔnsibul dɛn; ɛf fis yit fis, us wan na sɔl wata yon? Tu bayg rɛs lɔs, yu ala lɛk u dɛn kwis".

In more recent times, attempts have been made to represent WACE in terms of its own phonology, stimulated by the growing use of new, phonemic orthographies for indigenous African languages, and the number of works in and on creole languages which make use of such representations. One of the earliest systems was that of Tommy Decker, for Krio. Using only the letters available on an ordinary English typewriter, he represents the consonants as in English, and the seven vowels consistently by ‹i›, ‹ey›, ‹e›, ‹a›, ‹oh›, ‹o› and ‹u›. A number of poems and plays have appeared in this system and in a slightly modified form of it, devised by the now-defunct Krio Literary Society. In this, ‹ow› and ‹ey› represented mid-high, and ‹o› and ‹e› the mid-low vowels, except in final position, when ‹o› and ‹ey› stood for the mid-high and ‹oh› and ‹eh› the mid-low ones. Nasal vowels were represented by VOWEL plus ‹-nh›. Both these systems have the advantage of employing no unfamiliar characters. The system most likely to become current, since it has been used in their recently-published dictionary, is that adopted by Fyle and Jones, which makes use of the additional characters ‹ɛ› and ‹ɔ›. Since these are both used in the orthographies of indigenous Sierra Leonean languages such as Mende and Temne, they are not completely unfamiliar to an ever-increasing section of the population, and where such things were rare before, typewriters and print-shops incorporating these symbols are now becoming more common. There are some faults still with the Fyle and Jones orthography, in particular in its representation of the doubly-articulated stops and in its word division, which does not adequately represent the tonal distribution on syllables in compound items, but these can be refined in the course of time.

Publications in Cameroonian have reflected the orthography of the language of the nation which produced them. The most widespread spelling today is either based on English conventions, which make no concession to Cameroonian WACE phonology, or to those of French, and while this is rather more successfully phonemic and works for local speakers familiar with French spelling, these texts are not readily intelligible for speakers outside eastern Cameroon. Later publications in that country have employed more scientifically devised systems, although these do not generally acknowledge the distinction between the mid-high and the mid-low vowels, using ‹e›

and <o> for both and introducing no new symbols. In Cameroonian this is not such a serious omission as it would be for Krio, all non-English-based systems for which have included symbols to represent all of the seven oral vowels.

*Phonemes of Buea Cameroonian*

p b t d k g f s ʃ tʃ dʒ l r m n ŋ ɲ y w i

e ɛ a ɔ o u

*Sample of a Cameroonian dialect in German orthography (Hagen, 1908:52):*

"Koal oal jur wumen dem, klin haus end muf oal ting. If dem bi finisch, tell me" (*"Call all of your women to clean the house and rearrange everything. Tell me when they've finished"*).

*Sample of a Cameroonian dialect in English orthography (Plissonneau, 1957:33):*

"For number two law, God he want say, we de talk with respect of God, of Holy People and holy things, and we make the good things, whe we been promise for God".

*Sample of a Cameroonian dialect in one French orthography (King fo Toly, 2:v:63):*

"Oda day fo N'Tibinal, a hiya some wandafull lasker plaba. Wan Yawussa-Malam go full some young wuman say hi go meck di wuman djendley pass Mandessi-Bell sèp-sèp!" (*"The other day in Ntibinal, I heard a real con job. A Hausa holy-man fooled some young woman by saying that he would make her richer than Mandessi Bell himself"*).

*Sample of a Cameroonian dialect in another French orthography (Aubry, 1954:54):*

"Ouati? For ouat you no di uork? A di sik, masa. Ouskan sik? A di sik fo bèlè, uorm hi lif we dèm di tchop mi. Tok tru, you di sik or you slak; hi no bi di sèm tin". (*"What? Why aren't you working? I'm (getting) sick, Master. What kind of sickness? I'm (getting) sick in my stomach; worms are there which are eating me. Tell the truth, are you getting sick or are you lazy? it's not the same thing"*).

*Sample of a Cameroonian dialect in a phonemic orthography (Tebo, 1966:7):*

"Den som lepros man bi kam, an yi bi beg Jesus, an kini fo yi bifo, an tok fo yi sey, 'if na yu gri, yu fit fo mek mi a wel'" (*"Then a leper came, and*

*begged Jesus, and knelt before Him, saying, 'if You want, You are able to make me better'"* ).

*Sample of Santa Isabel dialect of Fernandino Creole, in Spanish orthography (de Zarco, 1937:29ff):*

"Mi jat an mi chus, ui bed an ui blankit. Mi fada, yu onkul, im moda an dem sista, dem de lif na ui contry. Dat Pañá rul, i bin bi gud tu moch; dem blant tu yu" (*"My hat and my shoes, our bed and our blanket; my father, your uncle, his mother and their sister, live in our (part of the) country. That Spanish rule was very good; they belong to you"*).

*Conclusion*

In summary, it would seem feasible to standardize two varieties of WACE, keeping each as free from English and local language interference as possible, and to employ for both a phonemic orthography which has no basis in the English spelling system. In this way, WACE will be seen as a language quite distinct from English and not one to be confused with it, such confusion resulting at the present time in poor competence in English, as well as in unwarranted negative attitudes towards WACE throughout West Africa.

*Useful reading*

Almost nothing is available in print dealing with the West African situation, although materials prepared for the Caribbean are often relevant. The following treatments deal with the problems of orthographic and dialect standardization, and with specific problems Creole speakers have in environments where the official language in English. Also included are non-linguistic and other sources mentioned in the text.

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